

Q&A: Simon Harris

'Electric Cherry Blossom'

3rd – 31st March 2018

Sarah Wiseman Gallery

- 1. How do you feel the newest work has developed or is developing since your last exhibition here at Sarah Wiseman Gallery? Previously you've talked about your work exploring theories behind abstraction. However, you've discussed other ideas about the work being akin to a digital space and the viewer 'discovering their own painterly moment.' Is this part of the newest development you've been making? Can you tell us more about how the abstraction and digital worlds meet?**

'Interesting question(s). I would claim that the largest development from my previous exhibition has been my investment in the replication of the image. By this I don't mean remaining faithful to the pictorial source but rather the idea of the simulacrum: a copy of a copy of a copy being in difference to the original and thus being it's own original. It has been through this process that I have been finding and developing potential figural painterly moments.

In addition, I have always made drawings that have run along side and have informed my paintings, however this process has now been extended into making drawings from my paintings to inform the next painting. Interestingly this echoes the body of work I developed at the beginning of my PhD in which I was examining the pictorial space of Vermeer's 'Girl with a Pearl Earring' as a potential for a comparison with an abstract space within painting. It was the paint of the collar on her dress that interested me the most. In the facsimiles I had been looking at it seemed as if it was some how dislocated from the rest of the composition and necessitated an examination of the painting in the flesh. This differs slightly, as now I'm much more inclined, and have the confidence, to employ an overtly figural plane. It would be in this development that the notion of an abstraction and the digital world collide, as the known collapses into the unknown and subsequently the space it leaves in-between, as an abstracted pictorial plane. It is in this space that I like to think of my paintings: as an oscillation between the virtual and the actual.'

- 2. We love the title 'Electric Cherry Blossom'! Can you explain a little more about where the title has come from, what the inspiration was behind that?**

'Ah thank you. It's a title that I have been playing around with in my head for quite a while now. I like it because it hints at a narrative without being prescriptive. Further, for me, it hints at the idea of Japanese screen paintings with a cinematic reference. However I think I finally decided that I wanted to use it as a title for my exhibition when I was in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, I have returned to this museum, along with the Rijksmuseum to visit Vermeer and Rembrandt, many times. I like to think of some of these paintings as old friends. When I arrived I immediately rushed to the third floor to see his 'Almond Blossom' painting, as it turned out everyone else

had the same idea, so I departed with the intention of returning late in the day when it might be quieter. So I started wondering the gallery and happened upon his 'Blossoming Pear Tree', which wasn't getting as much attention and I found myself captivated by it and it was in this moment that I kept returning the idea of electric cherry blossom. With some fear of how overly romantic this may sound, I like to think I made a new friend that day. I think that is what I hope to achieve with this exhibition that there is a hint of a narrative that isn't prescriptive that allows the viewer to use the pictorial cues as props to change the narrative, to find glitches, and as with all good friends a conversation, which is in-exhaustible.'

3. The work you make is very distinctive in its surface and texture - what processes do you go through to achieve this?

'A whole lot of medium – each layer is applied diaphanously and allowed to dry, which I then sand back and then reapply until the required intensity is achieved. It is through the sanding that often the image is achieved. As the paint is removed the image is created.'

4. Is there a typical day in the studio; do you find a good balance between the life of an academic and a painter?

'A good day in the studio is when I have long enough to have a snooze. I find this invaluable, whether I'm wrestling over a problem with my painting or writing some text, this was particularly the case when I was writing up my thesis. Finding the balance between being an academic and a painter can be difficult, however I like to visit my studio at least once a day. Sometimes this is to sit, think and look. I often find that it isn't long before I have either a brush or sandpaper in my hand and start advancing on the imagery. I also find it helps that I work in a fantastic fine art department at The University of Wolverhampton with wonderful studios that I have the privilege of having some space in. I work in amongst the students and find their questioning of both my techniques and intent helpful in solidifying the concepts I'm playing around with. I can have a smaller painting on the go at the University and a larger painting at Eagle Works, so I always have something that challenges me and I can be engaged with.'

5. Tell us more about working at Eagle Works [the shared artists' studio in Wolverhampton] it looks like such a fascinating building. Is it important to you to work alongside (or at least next door to) other artists?

'Again, it is a tremendous privilege to have a studio at Eagle Work, which has been an artistic community since 1984. It provides the right mix of solitude and conversation and I'm lucky to have my old head of Fine Art from my undergraduate days in the studio next to me: Knighton Hosking. We both share a love of Japanese painting and I find his passion and knowledge of painting inexhaustible.'

6. What other influences shape your work – any particular artists, music or books that you identify with?

‘Crikey... I would say David Reed has played a huge influence in the development of the surface of my paintings. Long before I had seen one of his paintings in the flesh I tried to make surfaces I imagined his would look like. Interestingly I think this has heavily influenced me as my only source of resolve was how they appeared on the digital screen or glossy pages of books. Also without wanting to sound clichéd: Caravaggio, Goya, Vermeer and Rembrandt feature strongly.’

7. What was your pathway into making art – how did you get started?

‘I was a first-year student nurse living away from home and in the nursing accommodation. I was the only student nurse in the block that was working Christmas day. It was my first time away. I had bought my family presents and knowing I wasn’t going to be at home, I also bought myself a present, which I wrapped, so I had something to open on Christmas Day. I bought myself a book called, something like, ‘So you always wanted to be an artist but didn’t think you are good enough’ It was full of simple painterly exercises, which I loved. I guess it grew in scale from there.’

8. What memorable responses have you had to your work?

‘My Mother-in-law once said that she felt she was inside one of my paintings looking out. I think that this is a fabulous concept.’

9. What’s next for you as an artist?

‘To finish the work for this exhibition and continue the conversation I hope to have started with ‘Electric Cherry Blossom.’